

# The Life and Ministry of the Rev. Hugh Cunningham of Tranent, 1758-1801

REV. T. ANGUS KERR, M.A., PH.D.

THE Rev. Hugh Cunningham was ordained and inducted as "assistant and successor" to his grand-uncle the Rev. Charles Cunningham of Tranent, on Thursday, April 15, 1784. In a recent article on the pre-Reformation churches of East Lothian, Dr. Ian B. Cowan notes that, the benefice was granted to Holyrood by Thor, son of Swan, being subsequently confirmed by Seyr de Quincey, the parsonage remaining with the abbey. A vicarage settlement took place in 1251, though it was frequently served by canons.<sup>1</sup> A notable vicar was Andrew, who flourished around 1320, and many letters passed between him and the monks of Holyrood. One document records the following: "In 1320 the monks of Newbattle made an agreement with Andrew, the perpetual vicar of Treuernent, about the tithes of the village and the land, which was called the Cottarie of Preston."<sup>2</sup> Tranent parish, therefore, is among the oldest in the country.

Coming to Reformation times, outstanding among Tranent's ministers was James Gibson, previously of Pencaitland and, celebrated for his trouble with the General Assembly and with King James. It was by the grace of the king that Gibson was settled here, which was probably the royal way of finally bridling a virulently critical subject. Other ministers of note were Robert and Walter Balcanquhal, father and son, who succeeded each other around the Carolean period. As Dr. Bulloch points out, they were most unpopular with presbytery, because they supported both bishop and liturgy. They were finally expelled from Tranent, the presbytery prosecuting Walter in vituperative language for "frequent tippling and tavern hunting".<sup>3</sup> An echo of the times may be heard in what happened at Tranent to James Gartshore, D.D., when he arrived to supply the pulpit during December, 1694. He had been minister there from 1683 till 1687 but, when he returned at the time mentioned, he found the pulpit occupied by an irregular preacher. Gartshore had to be content with conducting worship in the churchyard, nondescript people throwing stones

<sup>1</sup> *Transactions of the E. Lothian Antiquarian & Field Naturalists' Socy.*, Vol. VIII, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Tranent & its Surroundings*, P. M'Neill, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Transactions of the E. L. Antiquarian & F. N. Socy.*, Vol. VIII, p. 75.

from time to time at the assembled congregation. Hugh Cunningham's grand-uncle had a stormy entry into his pastorate which commenced during September, 1740. The congregation were strongly in favour of having as their minister the late incumbent's assistant and caused so much trouble at Cunningham's induction that the military had to be called out. Much bitterness was engendered yet, within a few years, he completely won the confidence of his flock and came to be regarded with great esteem. His ministry at Tranent lasted 53 years.<sup>1</sup>

Hugh Cunningham who followed, was the fifth child and third son of a family of nine, the father John being a prosperous East Lothian farmer. Generations of these Cuningshams had farmed at Luffness and neighbourhood in the parish of Aberlady. His mother, Elizabeth McPherson, owing to the death of her mother had resided until her marriage, with an uncle, her mother's brother, the Rev. John Barclay, minister of Moreham, 1714-52. It is written of Barclay that he was "a good sensible man, with not many words or topics of conversation, but a great mathematician".<sup>2</sup> Cunningham wrote in his unpublished *Diary* of his mother at the Moreham manse: "There, she had the happy advantages of a religious education, and the happier advantage of her worthy uncle's pious example."<sup>3</sup>

Hugh Cunningham tells us that he was uncertain as to the date of his birth, though he gives the year as 1758, because the parish register had been "unfaithfully kept" around that period. His education began at the parish school of Aberlady, at which establishment he continued for upwards of three years, after which he was sent to the Haddington Grammar School in which town he lodged with his mother's relatives. His earliest inclinations had been towards choosing the ministry as a profession but, when at Haddington, he evinced a strong desire to follow a sea-faring life, probably in imitation of his elder brother Charles, who, at fourteen, had joined a merchant ship. Cunningham's father, to gratify Hugh's wishes, sent him during May, 1772, to Tranent school, then under the charge of John Turcan, of whom more later. Here he resided with his father's uncle at the manse. It was in one of its rooms that the redoubtable Colonel James Gardiner of the loyalist forces died, after being mortally wounded at the battle of Prestonpans.

It was while beneath the shelter of the avuncular roof that young Cunningham's thoughts turned again to the worthwhileness of the ministry as a career. He writes: "I was not long here, till, observing the regular,

<sup>1</sup> *Tranent & its Surroundings*, M'Neill, pp. 66-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Fasti*, Vol. I (1866 Edition).

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.* p. iii.

pious, exemplary, peaceful and every way worthy behaviour of my Revd. Friend, I felt my former sentiments recurr and with double force. Arithmetic lost all its relish—I now wished more than ever to become a minister, and if possible, to resemble that worthy one with whom I lived.”<sup>1</sup> The lad’s parents were delighted to learn of this change of heart and, with alacrity, they despatched him back to Haddington—and Latin, during which two years, he says, “I gave double the attention I had formerly bestowed.” There follows the pious “Often have I blessed God for directing me to the choice of a profession, which I esteem, in which I have pleasure, and in which I trust I shall ever be useful.”<sup>2</sup>

Cunningham commenced his studies at the University of Edinburgh during the winter of 1774, in his seventeenth year. His *Diary* supplies the course of study and the various classes he attended, together with the particular year. 1774, Latin, Greek and Logic : 1775, Mathematics and Moral Philosophy : 1776, Moral Philosophy and Natural Philosophy. On the following year he was permitted to enter Divinity studies though, he writes, this was “contrary to the regulations, for it is required that all intending Probationers shall study Philosophy for 3 years before they be admitted to the Study of Theology.” His tutor in Divinity was Professor Robert Hamilton, who had previously been minister of Cramond and Lady Yester’s and, who was Moderator of the General Assembly during 1754 and again in 1760.<sup>3</sup> Cunningham also studied Hebrew, admitting that he had “reason to regret the little pains I bestowed on this last study”. From 1778 till 1781, he continued his studies not at the University, but at his father’s farm. During 1780, the Rev. Neil Roy of Aberlady, the family church, advised Cunningham to seek trials for license, promising to bring his name before some presbytery. Neil was a graduate in Arts of the University of Glasgow, and later one of its D.Ds. An influential friend of Cunningham’s father also urged him to pursue this course, advising him that it might well lead to an appointment as his Tranent relative’s colleague and successor. Cunningham says that this worthy “was now very much in the decline of life, preaching little himself, and frequently supplied with preaching by the Presbytery.” Even so, he was to live on until 1793, dying at the ripe age of ninety-one. The Presbytery of Haddington proved accommodating, since they realised that, if the young man was licensed as a probationer, they would be relieved of supplying Tranent church. He therefore entered upon trials for license in the following spring, becoming a probationer of the Church on October 7, 1781. The Sunday following,

<sup>1</sup> *Diary*, p. vi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> *Fasti*, I, 46-7.

he supplied his grand-uncle's church, taking as his text, the Gospel of St. John, 3 : 16.

After supplying Tranent and neighbouring parishes for several months, Cunningham resolved on a London holiday, two of his married sisters being resident there. He left in mid-July by ship from Berwick, the voyage lasting five days. During his six weeks sojourn in the metropolis, he became friendly with a few nonconformist ministers, probably being introduced to them by his relatives. He was taken notice of by the Rev. Dr. Henry Mayo, whom James Boswell named "The Literary Anvil", because of the manner in which during a conversation on the liberty of conscience in religion, he had stood up with perfect poise to Dr. Johnson's pungent criticisms.<sup>1</sup> Mayo had Cunningham preach twice for him in the chapel of the Independent Congregation situated in Nightingale Lane, Wapping.<sup>2</sup> He also conducted services for two other dissenting clergymen, the Rev. Thomas Rutledge whose meeting house was near Wapping, and a Mr. Smith whose place of worship was in Camberwell. During his stay, Cunningham visited what he calls, "many of the Curiosities", and went to several public entertainments. He came home by coach during the latter half of August, seeing Oxford on the way.

On his return to Tranent, Cunningham took up his lodgings in the manse and, to use his own words, began at once as "a stated and fixed assistant". Realising, doubtless, what was at stake, he discharged his duties with "modesty and prudence". During the following summer he examined the parish catechetically, but did not engage in general visitation though he called on the sick, because he did not wish to expose himself "to severe and inevitable criticism of the neighbouring clergy". But he soon became locally popular and, there arose a general feeling that he should be the next minister. "The People, naturally prejudiced in my favours, being a near connection of their worthy Pastor, and being but a few years before educated at their School, began now to be my warm and sincere Friends. They wished much some methods could be fallen upon for having me ordained Assistant and Successor to my Uncle." What Cunningham averred agrees with the Tranent Kirk Session Minute of December 1, 1783, which states: "The Elders represented that in the different districts of the Parish in which they reside, they had heard the Inhabitants of every denomination express their approbation of Mr. Hugh Cunningham present assistant to the minr., declaring their entire satisfaction with him in every respect . . ."<sup>3</sup> The Minute goes on: "The minr. informed the meeting he

<sup>1</sup> Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, III, 296.

<sup>2</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. XIII, 172.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vol. 1773-1824, p. 121.

was happy to find, that when thro' age and infirmity he was unable to discharge all the duties of his pastoral office himself, he had got an assistant, who was in every respect so agreeable to the populous Parish . . .”<sup>1</sup> Thereupon, the session unanimously resolved to support the claims of Hugh Cunningham.

In the meantime, influential friends had been at work on his behalf and they were able to procure the royal warrant of George III, dated December 10, 1783, appointing him assistant and successor. The majority of the heritors including the two greatest, had favoured the candidature of somebody else, so that worthy of note is the deference paid in this instance, to the local choice. In gratitude, Cunningham noted down a number of resolutions. He would constantly bear in mind a thankful sense of “the friendship, care, diligence and attention” of those who had furthered his cause. In particular, his reverend relative, for his sustained fatherly interest ; the minister’s son, Alexander Cunningham, W.S., for his zealous attention ; Mr. Patrick McClarran, provost of Haddington, for using “his utmost influence” with Francis Charteris of Bearston, who was the local Member of Parliament ; the Rev. Robert Scott, minister of Haddington and so on. Cunningham supplies a list of the concurring heritors and feuars, and the landed gentry including the Earl of Hopetoun and Lord Elibank ; also the five elders of the church ; and he notes those who brought his application before Lord North.<sup>2</sup> Towards the non-concurring heritors he is resolved “to bear a love of benevolence”. His final resolution is that “if it please God to spare me till I be ordained the minister of this people—That I will rely on the strength of God and be conscious of my duty—Examine and visit as often as my other ministerial duties and avocations will permit—Observe the exercises of piety in my family when God shall bless me with one—In one word to adhere as nearly to the conduct and behaviour of my worthy friend who had already lived 42 years amongst this people void of offence to man. So help me God ! Hugh Cunningham.”

But fate took a swift hand in Cunningham’s affairs for, due to a severe illness, contracted during January, 1784, he was not ordained and inducted at Tranent till the middle of April : he was then twenty-six. The nature of his sickness was a severe fever which lasted 20 days, and it probably contained the seeds of the disease that was to carry him off in the prime of manhood. Tranent Kirk Session Minute of April 15, 1784 reads :

“This day the Reverend the Presbytery of Haddington convened in this church according to appointment, and after an excellent sermon

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> *Diary*, pp. xi, xii, & xiii.

preached by Mr. John Trotter minr. of Pans on Ps. 89: 15—‘Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound : they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance’—proceeded, and by imposition of hands set apart Mr. Hugh Cunningham to the holy office of the ministry . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Trotter later became Professor of Oriental Languages at St. Andrews.<sup>2</sup> The Minute following that of April 15, that is, of April 18, states that

“After sermons . . . Considering that the sum of £1 : 6 : 2½ was collected at the ordination of Mr. Hugh Cunningham, and on reflecting on the great straits of the poor, and the high prices of provisions, the meeting unanimously agreed to give each of the persons on the Roll, including the occasional poor, 6d. each, being 59 in all.”

This was by way of being an extra.

The Rev. John Hamilton, clerk both of the Synod and Presbytery of Haddington preached Cunningham in, the latter officiating at the second diet and speaking from the words, “Who is sufficient for these things?”<sup>3</sup>

Now firmly in the saddle, the young minister proceeded to visit every family in the parish whose population in 1755 had been 2459.<sup>4</sup> By the time of his August Communion services, he had more than half completed his task. Feeling the need of a short break, Cunningham set off for Wooler where, he preached for an intimate school and college friend, Thomas Murray, a licentiate of the Church of Scotland, but who had gone, failing preferment, to be minister of a dissenting chapel. On his return, Cunningham learned that his youngest brother, George, aged 17, had fallen victim to tuberculosis, a family weakness. The day following, Sunday October 2, much afflicted by the loss, he delivered an *in memoriam* sermon at Tranent on Ps. 39: 9 : “I was dumb, I opened my mouth ; because thou didst it.” He gives in his *Diary* an excerpt from the sermon, in which he extols, in the manner of the age, his brother’s virtues ; and he concludes :

“Often when the struggle became hard would he invoke the gracious aid and merciful compassion of his Lord to interfere and send the looked-for deliverance. God at last—the father of mercies heard the voice—Jesus . . . at last came and loosed the bonds . . . In that blessed presence we trust it is . . . , tasting all the sweets of that

<sup>1</sup> *K.S.R.*, 1773-1824, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> *Fasti*, Vol. I, 353.

<sup>3</sup> *Diary*, p. xvi.

<sup>4</sup> *Sinclair’s Statistical Account*, 1794, Vol. X, p. vii.

immortal tree which grows fast by the throne of God and ever ripens for the just.”<sup>1</sup>

The sudden death of an aunt a few days later plunged the family further into mourning, but also brought a sense of balance to their grief. “In the midst of judgment, we have come likewise to sing of mercy,” he writes. “A very short time after this we received the agreeable information that my sister Lawrie was safely delivered of a son.”<sup>2</sup>

During the summer of 1785, we find Cunningham assiduously visiting his parishioners, and continuing the work of catechizing. On the first Sunday of August, he administered the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper about which he says,

“I was happy to find that my private admonitions to such as had through a course of years neglected this reasonable duty was attended with considerable success. I had double the number of young communicants this year I had the last, being sixty-two in all.”

He had further exchanges of pulpits with Murray but, his friend, he tells us, was soon forced to resign owing to a split in the church due to “the rabble of the congregation not choosing to vote at his election, purely in opposition to the trustees and elders who were for him.” Cunningham’s thoughts around this time turned to matrimony by the appearance in Tranent of a Miss Brown of Linton, who had come to be companion to her uncle and aunt, Haldane by name, he being an Edinburgh Writer to the Signet. The family resided in Tranent during the summer, and had become friendly with the minister. “I had daily occasion of seeing her”; he writes, “observing her great attention, and generous sympathy, I could not help admiring one who possessed these fine feelings in so great a degree.” Soon an understanding as to marriage was reached between them.

Towards the end of 1785, Cunningham was bereft of his mother, for whom he had cherished a deep affection. Never robust, her youngest son’s death the previous year had further undermined her constitution. Cunningham spends pages of his Diary, describing the final stages of her fatal illness. He informs us that, with a profusion of tears he took a “last leave of that countenance on which I had oftentimes gazed with inexpressible delight—commending her in fervent manner to the mercies of God in Christ Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> His mother’s cousin, wife of the Rev. Archibald Blair of Garvald, died about the same time, and Cunningham received much consolation, he says, by a book that came to hand quite by accident. This

<sup>1</sup> *Diary*, p. xix.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

<sup>3</sup> *Diary*, p. xxv.

was a life of Matthew Henry the commentator which had been extracted mostly from his own diary. "Here I saw particularly the trials of this good man met with in the death of relations and friends, much heavier than mine have been, and the pious workings of his soul under these afflictions." It was this diary that suggested to him that he ought to begin one of his own, and he summed up his reasons thus :

"I now take God to witness that so far as I know mine own heart, I have no ostentations, or dishonest views, as the things recorded in this and any other book of the same kind I may afterwards write, are intended only for my own private use, and I pray God for my good. If they shall survive me they will of course fall into the hands of my dearest relatives, who after they have perused them themselves, if they shall think it worth their while, they would commit them to the flames or otherwise destroy them."<sup>1</sup>

Cunningham kept up entries in his diary for upwards of two years, and there are some twenty pages unused at the end of the book.

Some of the entries for 1787 amount to only a word or two, and there are quite a number of days and dates with blanks underneath. It may be that there were other volumes which have become irretrievably lost, but on the other hand it would seem that the writer grew tired of the exercise, notwithstanding his good intentions, and ceased altogether to keep a diary.

By coincidence, his colleague of the Associate Congregation, the Rev. Robert Shirreff, whose only charge was at Tranent, continued to keep a diary for over forty years. But more of this later.

Sinclair's *Statistical Account* provides a clear-cut picture of Tranent, which Cunningham himself wrote, around 1794. The population in 1755 was 2459, and in 1792<sup>2</sup> it numbered 2732, the small increase of 273 seemingly indicating a parish of quite settled conditions. There were some two dozen larger and smaller proprietors, and the main industries farming apart, being fisheries, pottery, salt works, collieries and their boasted "most considerable distillery now in Scotland", at St. Clements Wells.<sup>2</sup> The parish church in Cunningham's time besides being somewhat dilapidated, had come to be too small for the needs of the congregation ; the minister was to see a new building erected just before his death. The living was a Crown one, on account of the attainder of the Earl of Winton who had espoused the Stewart cause at the rebellion of 1715. The day-school system was better than in many districts, there being usually from 60 to

<sup>1</sup> *Diary*, p. xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> *Statistical Account*, 1794, Vol. X, 87.

80 pupils at Tranent, while in other parts of the parish, small groups of children irregularly assembled to be taught voluntarily by some seven public-spirited men and women. The maximum number of children attending all these centres during the summer of 1791 is given as 220. Cunningham notes that

"There are besides, the Sabbath evening catechetical exercises ; one supported by an annual collection at the church doors, the other upon the establishment of the Society in Scotland for promoting religious knowledge amongst the poor."<sup>1</sup>

Careful records of baptisms and burials in Tranent were kept unto 1784, says our author, but due to a general tax then imposed, many parishioners refused to pay and therefore, no entry was made. This, he affirms, was responsible for similar imperfect records in other Scottish parishes. There was a Burgher church with a membership of 110, 8 Antiburghers, 1 member of the Relief Church, and 10 Episcopalian. There were apparently no Roman Catholics. Cunningham's article is, statistically, one of the best in the entire series. He states that one in three children of both sexes died ere they were five, and but one in five reached the ripe age of seventy. Smallpox was what accounted for most of the deaths among the young. About £100 per annum was expended on the needs of the poor.

In a final paragraph, Cunningham notes the influx of the poorer classes to the parish, mainly through the prospect of getting cheap fuel. The roads were among the worst in the whole county, due to the employment of so many heavily-laden carts, so that in wet weather, some of the cross roads were almost impassable. Whisky was distilled in large quantities besides what was commissioned by private families from the stills ; and, says Cunningham, "The extraordinary consumpt of this article throughout Scotland at large, may indicate a thriving trade, and productive revenue, but affords a small prospect of a sudden increase in moral and social virtues."<sup>2</sup> There was a pocket-sized library in Tranent of 200 volumes, the hope being expressed that the wealthy would greatly and quickly increase its numbers.

The *Diary* bears many records of Cunningham's faithful pastoral activities. "Examining the inhabitants of the N.side of Elphinston—highly satisfied with the attendance of the people." (35)<sup>3</sup> "Went round by St. Clements Wells this forenoon, visited the different families . . . held a diet of examination, where I examined about a dozen."(63) Sometimes his

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Statistical Account*, Vol. X, 98.

<sup>3</sup> *Diary*: page number *et seq.*

catechetical excursions have led him to the schoolhouse (66); to Port Seton and Cockenzie, the bounds of the parish (68); and to particular houses and farms and hamlets: "Friday, 28, 1786—This afternoon drank tea with Mr. and Mrs. Ferme, Riggenehead—afterwards examined the different families there. Had a good deal of satisfaction in them as I always have had." (95) "Our family dined at Lord Hyndfords. After dinner I came off for the Myles where I had fixed a diet of examination. After tea, I visited and examined all the families—I had about 38 scholars, decent, knowing people." (64) Cunningham was an enthusiastic tea drinker as the numerous entries in his *Diary* show, and he seems to have partaken of the beverage at any hour of the day and night.

Those in trouble received much of his attention. He writes on 22nd November, 1786:

"Was informed by our maid's mother who had come from Tranent that 2 men, Geo. Hinlay and Robt. Steel were killed last night in the S. Coal pit. Such an effect had this information over my spirits that I could not be happy till I . . . took a share in the troubles of the distressed friends. Accordingly set off and sympathised by prayer with both of them." (126)

A typical example of how he tackled sick visitation is under the date, 23rd December, 1785:

"This day I devoted for visiting the sick. Accordingly went and prayed with four. The performance of this duty was a pleasure and a relief to my mind as I had thereby an opportunity of embosoming myself, as it were. What a powerful argument against immoderate sorrow are the numberless scenes of affliction we may daily witness. When I beheld one struggling at once with bodily disease and poverty and withal burdened with small children, she a widow—and beheld another stretched on a bed of sickness and pain, and witnessed 2 others fast approaching their end, being quite exhausted with a long and tedious consumption, I could not help adopting the language of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, 4:2, 'Wherefore I praised the dead that are already dead, more than the living that are yet alive'." (5,6)

He visits an old woman in mortal illness, and regrets that through her deafness he was unable to communicate with her satisfactorily about what he calls, "momentous concerns." (9) He finds such visiting saps his vitality but, likes it because of how appreciative the sick are. After calling on several of the seriously ill he is constrained to write:

"What a poor sickly dying race are mortals! O that God would make us know our end and the measure of our days, that we may know how frail we are." (27)

Professional etiquette shines through where he tells of being sent for, to the bedside of an ailing child near his father's farm, though he did not offer up prayer lest his conduct "should be interpreted by the minr. of the parsh into intrusion or officiousness."

On another day, he goes to see "Edwd. Samson's widow—her husband a sailor, drowned the other day taking boat at Glasgow to go down to Greenock to the ship in which he was to have gone to Greenland. The poor woman in great distress." (154)

Typical of the neurotic parishoner is the following:

"Considerably interrupted with Mr. McCleod who was constantly by me. He is much troubled with imaginary complaints which Physicians call Hippocondriac disorder and, as a natural attendant of the disease does not choose to be by himself nor yet seriously apply himself to anything." (9)

Shortly afterwards, McCleod, doubtless much to the minister's relief, left the Parish to live in Edinburgh.

Cunningham was meticulous in his sermon preparation and conduct of divine services. The *Diary* proper begins on Sunday, 18th December, 1785, and he hails Christmas Day that year as the

"Blessed morning of that day in which the Son of God became man . . . The day tho' cold yet I felt my heart warmed with these glad tidings of peace. I wished much the preacher (Roy of Aberlady) had been as warm as the subject was important." (6,7)

Cunningham endeavoured to keep his Saturdays sacrosanct.

"I have seldom or ever hitherto transgressed upon Sat. appropriating it entirely to my studies. I am much insisted upon to dine at the Myles today. Thither I have accordingly gone, but came off immediately after dinner. By once breaking a good rule you may do it a hundred times. By visiting on Saturdays a minr. may be pestered with invitations for that day. When you put little value upon it yourself, others will put less. A Saturday's dinner I have known very much to destroy the effect of a Sunday's sermon." (16)

He kept a careful record of the texts and passages of Scripture preached and, the *Diary* is sprinkled with the gist of his sermons.

"On the reasons for Religion—1. The Relation we stand to God—The revelation of his will to us. 2. The wisdom of religion—its pleasantness—its advantages—its glorious reward, etc. Was considerably enlarged in both discourses." (33)

Mention was made of the fatal pit accident and, on the Sunday following he preached from "Watch therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh." His audience, he says was "attentive and much affected." Another Sunday he preaches from *Isaiah 28:16, 17*, "Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation, a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation . . ."

"Considered these words as prophetical of Christ and described him under these characters, 1. As a stone, for solidity, firmness, and durableness. 2. As a tried stone. 3. As a precious stone—a very attentive audience. I was long in ignorance as to these comfortable doctrines of free grace, and designedly refrained from particularly discoursing of them from an idea, which is well founded, that they are disagreeable to the higher orders of our people—but now methinks I understand them better and have got so far the better of my prejudice that I resolve in the strength of God to know nothing but Christ and him crucified." (135)

The Communion seasons were entered upon by Cunningham with zeal and energy. The entry in his Diary for Thursday, 27th July, 1786, reads: "Had appointed this evening for young communicants waiting upon me. Had accordingly 15 of them." The fast day took place on the Thursday prior to communion, and occupied the whole day, when the new members were received. (96) The Thanksgiving was on the Monday following, when a regular exchange of ministers took place. (90,92) He writes of 8th August, 1786: "This being the Thanksgiving day—the Revd. Mr. Andw. Nisbet of Garvald preached to us from *Heb. 12:14* . . . and the Rev. Dr. John Main minr. of Newton in the presbytery of Dalkeith from St. John, "Peace I give unto you . . ." (97) The Kirk Session Minutes read that on 29th August, 1792, "there was occasion for sermon without, the church being unable to hold the people." But numbers attending were affected by weather conditions as, for instance: "This (communion, 9th February, 1794) happening in the midst of a great storm, there were only 7 Table services (K.S.R.)" But some 450 people present on such a day was nothing to be depressed about. Descriptive of a summer Communion day at Tranent is the *Diary* entry of 7th August, 1786:

"This being our Solemn service day our church met precisely half an hour after 10 o'clock. I preached from Matt. 1:21, And she shall bring forth a son and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. Then after the necessary forms proceeded to the service of the Tables—had 11 altogether and about 640 communicants . . . Half after 4 afternoon before we could get

out . . . A comfortable day. O that the fruits of holiness may appear." (97)

A main concern of Cunningham, the elders and the heritors was that of the care of the poor. The Diary, Kirk Session and Heritors' Minute books have many references to the ingathering and disposal of funds to those in need, funds being apparently administered on a strictly Established church basis. For instance, a heritors' Minute states that they "resolve that vagrant Poor of every Denomination have no claim upon the Funds of the Parish, and discharge the application of any of the Poor's Funds for that purpose in future."<sup>1</sup> The distribution of regular pensions was the care of the Kirk Session and, the amounts doled out were parsimonious even by 18th century standards. They ranged from 6d. to 1/- per week, an exceptional one being 2/- to an orphan boy which they grudged because it was alleged that he was indolent. The heritors stated that they "are of the opinion that Alexr. Waddel's Pension, 2/- per week is too much, recommend to Session to reduce his allowance and to find him Employment as soon as possible."<sup>2</sup> The lad either seemed unable or unwilling to find work for, Mr. John Caddel, one of the chief heritors, refused to pay "his assessments of the poors money," reads a Kirk Session Minute, "as long as the boy Sandie Waddel continued upon the weekly list of pensioners, and intimated that he had given orders for his employment at the Pottery at P.pans." This case continued for several years for, as late as January, 1788, the Kirk Session was still "considering this affair of the boy Sandie Waddel who was proving difficult . . . , and, they directed one of the Elders, "John Hedglie to take the boy to the pottery and see and get him taken into employment, certifying that if after being so entailed, and running away, the session shall consider themselves as entirely freed from the burden of his support."

Poor scholars were provided for:

"Compeared Marion Anderson, a poor widow, asking the favour of education for her son. The session knowing her to be in indigent circumstances, ordered the boy to be put to Mr. Turcan's school with this express order that he shall attend constantly, if not the session will not pay for his education."<sup>3</sup>

At Cunningham's ordination, the collection was given to the poor because of their "great straits", due to "the high price of provisions."<sup>4</sup> Lists of

<sup>1</sup> *Tranent Heritors' Minute Book*, Vol. I, 9/8/1784.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3/6/1785.

<sup>3</sup> *K.S.R.*, 24/10/1787.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25/4/1784.

pensioners were kept, with details as to age, health, condition and so forth. Not a penny was given unnecessarily, and pensions were stopped when the position of recipients improved. Heritors, too, were to toe the line. It was resolved at a session meeting to

"take legal Steps for the recovery of the Arrears (of poor's money) due immediately, the more so as Winter is fast approaching, the price of Meal lately raised and the situation of some poor People on the list such as rendered an addition to their Pension necessary."<sup>1</sup>

The Diary and the Kirk Session records make frequent mention of those rebuked and in certain instances excommunicated for moral lapses. On Sunday, 1st January, 1786, Cunningham wrote: "Bad beginning of the year 2 fornicators and one adultery before our session today." (12) Later that year: "Rebuked again the adulterer—after sermons both transgressors waited on the session and were again reproved, exhorted and absolved—The fornicators child baptized." (135)

Again, "Evening a meeting of session examining a woman from Gladsmuir parish who is come here to reside with her mother, being with child." (139)

Sunday was strictly kept, five men being on one occasion named to the session as being

"guilty of profanation of the Lord's day, on Sabbath morning last the 27th of April . . . with certification that if they fail to attend, process will be commenced against them before the Sherrif or his Majestie's Justices of the peace."<sup>2</sup>

They duly appeared and

"professed great sorrow for their sin and promised to be more circumspect in time coming, and more regular in Public Worship."<sup>3</sup>

The following shows how exacting church discipline could be.

"The minister reported that William Dickson being anxious to have his scandal removed, under which he had lain these 2 or 3 years . . . The Session considering his behaviour during that period had been blameless and he promising to pay 10/- exacted of him, the Session agreed to dismiss him with a rebuke; which being done he was accordingly absolved."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *K.S.R.*, 17/11/1785.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4/5/1788.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11/5/88.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 24/7/1785.

Those who contracted irregular marriages had to reckon with the kirk session.

“Compeared John Barclay and Elizabeth Brown, both residents in Cockenzie, produced marriage lines dated at Edinburgh 21st May, 1786 subscribed by William Gloag one of the ministers of Edinburgh. They were reproved and later engaged to behave as becomes married persons and having paid the proclamation dues and five shillings to the poor, their marriage was ordered to be recorded.”<sup>1</sup>

Cunningham found it far from easy to make new elders. During 1785 the kirk session nominated twelve, and the Diary shows the minister strenuously endeavouring to gain them, but only five in the end accepted; a farmer, a gardener, a wright, and two others, a meal-maker and a shoemaker who were not on the original list.<sup>2</sup> (56) The Diary tells of one such effort.

“Met with Mr. Turnbull Myles today—Used my influence with him to be an elder—not fond of it—I have my own doubts of the propriety of insisting too much upon him—yet ashe is one of the principal farmers in the parish I would wish on that account he would accept.” (39)

He didn’t; nor did other eight.

The session clerk was Mr. John Turcan, who was also precentor and schoolmaster, and his relations with his former pupil the minister, were of the most cordial. Characteristic is this comment from the Diary:

“Drank tea with Mr. Turcan’s family. He is a truly honest man I believe and a sincere Christian, our Parish Schoolmaster with whom I received the little Arithmetic I have.” (28)

Cunningham regularly visited his school and examined the pupils; (36) we find Turcan and him working harmoniously at the manse; (40) engaged in visiting together; (129) and Cunningham was always a welcome guest at the other’s home. The schoolmaster resigned from all his posts during 1788, being succeeded by Robert Paisley from Inverkeithing. A heritors’ Minute states that he was unanimously chosen “schoolmaster of this parish, clerk to the heritors and collector of the Poor’s Rates and Road-Money . . .”<sup>3</sup> He became also precentor and session clerk and, he has some claim to be remembered as being among the first to recognise the merits of Sunday School work. “Mr. Paisley informed the session of his

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 5/9/1786.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20/11/85.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, 9/10/1788.

plan of teaching a Sabbath day school, which met with their hearty approbation.”<sup>1</sup>

Following their custom, the session normally met after the Sunday morning service, but this practice they eventually discontinued. The Minute of 3rd January, 1791 records *inter alia* that

“The session then took into consideration, how inconvenient, and in many cases how highly improper it was to hold their meetings and transact business upon the Lord’s day did unanimously resolve to remedy the same, and for this end appoint that the session meet the first Monday of every month at 6 o’clock . . . ; the session reversing to themselves the power of transacting business purely ecclesiastical . . upon the Sabbath . . .”

The session had charge of church collections, which on occasion were taken on behalf of special charities. We learn of Cunningham intimating

“a collection next Lord’s day for the Society for propagating Christian Knowledge, to assist them in translating and publishing the Old Testament in the Gaelic Language.”<sup>2</sup>

This had been a General Assembly recommendation. The Minute following goes on to state that the collection amounted to £2 17s. 8d. “out of which deducing the average collection there remained £2 10s. for the purpose.” The ordinary Sunday offering, therefore, seems to have been exceedingly modest. We also learn of presbytery appointing a particular Sunday for a collection on behalf of the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh. It amounted to “four guineas exclusive of 9/8 $\frac{3}{4}$  deduced for our own poor.”<sup>3</sup> On the first Sunday of 1792, the collection went to the purchase of coals for the poor, “the session after reserving 10/- as their ordinary collection, allowed 1 shilling to each of the pensioners on the list . . .”

The elders, as nowadays, had districts allotted. Following upon the ordination in the presence of a “Throng audience” (61) of five new elders, bringing their number up to ten, we note that

“The session now that an addition is made to the eldership, wishing to divide the trouble (labour) more equally among them, think it convenient to assign to each of them a certain district, over which they may have a more particular eye, therefore made the following appointments . . .”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *K.S.R.*, 17/12/1788.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6/3/1785.

<sup>3</sup> *K.S.R.*, 20/10/1785.

*Ibid.*, 8/5/1786.

Cunningham was fond of travel. He was a frequent visitor to Edinburgh calling on his friends, relatives, dining at popular eating houses, inspecting the book shops, attending church services and being a commissioner of the General Assembly. His Diary of Sunday, 5th November, 1786, tells of a full day there.

“Mrs. Cunningham (a relation) and I set off in the morning for Edinr. in Glen’s Chaise where we arrive to breakfast . . . I go to St. Andws. Church N. Town, heard Mr. Greenfield lect. . . . Afternoon I go to Tolbooth Church, heard Mr. Kemp on a subject preparatory to the Sacrt. wh. is celebrated in Edinr. next Sunday—sat in Mr. Lawrie’s (a relative’s) seat—drank tea with my aunt . . . , go and hear the Methodists.” (121) Another entry runs: “Go for Edinr. today—taking up with marriage—Engage Dr. Wm. Gloag to marry me.” (123) There is an account of a week spent in Glasgow and its surrounds, his coach leaving at 8 a.m. and arriving there at 6. Next day he tours the city and the university, after which he paid a similar visit to Paisley where he saw “some of the manufactories.” (110) He attended an ordination at Cumnock, noting the minister concerned as “a very promising young man . . . but 23 years of age.” (111) Back again at Paisley, he visited “in particular the Abbey Church and echoing Isle—take a solitary walk and recollect my sermons for tomorrow.” (112) He writes of the following day:

“Preached this forenoon in the Ram’s Horn (Church, Glasgow) for Mr. Rankin from John 3:16. 1st discourse, Ps 39:9. the 2nd pretty much at my ease. Afternoon for Dr. Taylor in one of the High Churches (St. Mungo’s Cathedral, in fact) to a very crowded and large audience from Matt. 4:21,” all of them his well-thumbed passages. (112)

The two outstanding social events of these early years of Cunningham’s ministry were his marriage, and a second visit to London which lasted 6 weeks. During the middle of May, 1786, he went by ship from Berwick, the sea being “a dead calm.” (71) Apparently no sailor, the following morrow he was “very sick all day.” The voyage began on a Thursday and by Sunday they passed Yarmouth where he “heard bells ringing.” Later that day he “read to his fellow passengers one of Arthur’s sermons, a book which I bought at Berwick.” (72) By Tuesday afternoon he had arrived in London where he went to lodge with a married sister. Soon he is engrossed with the life he sees around him. Of 25th May, he writes: “This Holy Thursday. The Charity children of the different schools walk in procession with white wands.” (74) He stopped “at St. Pauls and heard service.” Next day he drives into the country and “Had a view of Windsor Castle.” At Reading he visits the local churches including

St. Giles' whose rector was a son of Lord Cadogan. Cunningham writes: "Cadogan what they call a methodist—It is truly hard that a man can't be more than ordinarily faithful but he must be branded . . ." (75) He dines in an inn full of "farmers—ignorant and illiterate, profane in the highest degree—nothing passed but an account of a sware." (75) They may have staged it for his benefit.

He returned to London where, one morning he worshipped at the Foundling Hospital and heard some "fine singing." (76) He met again his non-conformist minister friend Rutledge and also "The Revd. and worthy old Mr. Patrick who has been now 47 years a minr. of a Presbyterian meeting house in London . . ." (76) He records that he "Saw a balloon today which was let off from the Lyceum near York buildings," while on another he "went to the Exhibition of paintings in Somerset House." He preached once more at Dr. Mayo's chapel and partook of the sacrament, which they celebrated monthly. He preached again for Rutledge, producing his sermon on Ps. 39:9. He wrote of Monday, 5th June, 1786:

"Observed as the King's birthday—was down by the Park when they fired." In the evening there were "some very beautiful illuminations." (79) He describes the royal thanksgiving service thus: "Set off . . . for Westminster Abbey—stood squeezed in the crowd for more than half an hour till the doors opened—then sit till 12 till the music began—a noble entertainment truly—The number of performers 743—a fine assemblage of company—The King, Queen, 2 princesses and 3 princes and many of the nobility—got out at 4 p.m. fatigued a good deal . . . (80)

He was taken to the House of Lords where he heard them debate a bill connected with the affairs of the East India Company. (82) Admitted to the Lower House, he listened to Pitt and Dundas "speak to form." (85) At his sister's, he met "a Captain Haig of Bimmerside," doubtless an ancestor of the Field Marshal. Cunningham's sojourn at an end, he left by boat, "The Salmon, Gibson Master," he writes, arriving back in Tranent, some 5 days later.

Cunningham was married on Monday, 20th November, 1786, to Miss Janet Brown of East Linton. Hew Scott states that their issue consisted of one son but, the *Tranent Heritors' Minute Book* clearly shows that there were other children.<sup>1</sup> After Cunningham's death, his brother James wrote to the heritors about repairs to the manse and buildings the minister

<sup>1</sup> *Fasti*, Part I, 360.

had commissioned and payed for himself. The brother admitted that there could be no legal claim on the heritors, yet hopes

"that you will have the goodness to view and inquire into what has been done and after doing so (you shall judge them to be useful and necessary appendages to what yourselves had so recently and so liberally done . . .) you are pleased to allow the children for them, whatever will be most gratefully acknowledged by the trustees who will ever retain a proper sense of this proof of your friendship for the children as well as for the many marks of your attention to their deceased father while in life."<sup>1</sup>

A later minute of 5/6/1802 records a grant for the repairs undertaken and notes: "To the late minister's children £15."

Cunningham's first child was born on 6th September, 1787, and the Diary describes the event in some detail: "I pray God she (his wife) may have a good recovery and this little one whom God has given us spared as a comfort—I devoted him in my mind and heart to God most high!" (177) A fortnight later the child, named John, was baptised by Cunningham's grand-uncle Charles. This son was to become a minister also, being licensed by the Presbytery of Haddington in 1809. He was a graduate in Arts of Edinburgh University, and became successively minister of Newtyle, Angus, and of Kinglassie, Fife.

Cunningham was a well-known visitor to various E. Lothian manses as his *Diary* proves: "Dined with the Revd. Geo. Anderson of Pencaitland today—a pleasant man upwards of 60 years." (37) "Passed an hour with the Revd. Mr. Colvin of Ormiston. This I think a very good man, and acts up to the true dignity of his character." (38) "Drank tea en passant with Mr. Anderson minr. of Pencaitland." (45) "Supped and stayed all night with the Revd. Dr. Barclay, one of the minrs. of Haddington." (47) "Called at the Revd. Mr. John Ewan's minr. of Whittingham" : so it goes on. (59)

He has quite a number of entries about his presbytery which met in Haddington. "Tuesday, 7th Febr., 1786. This a Presbytery day—but owing to its badness (the weather, presumably) only 6 of us present—Dr. Barclay, Mr. Scott, minr. of Hadn., Mr. Roy, minr. of Aberlady, Mr. Hamilton Bolton, Mr. Nisbet Garvald and myself." (34) At another sederunt we learn of them choosing General Assembly commissioners, three ministers and "Lord Hyndford ruling elder." (54) Cunningham was

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, 15/12/1801.

elected presbytery "moderator for the first time" during the summer of 1786; there was "no business," he writes. (89) Apparently the moderator was changed twice yearly. Of another meeting: "No business except a complaint by one Hay of Townhead against Mr. Innes his minr. for not baptising his child." (129) The synod as now, met in Edinburgh: "Tuesday 2nd May, 1786. This day the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale met, Mr. Dobie of Mid-Calder preached the sermon. Mr. Welsh of Manners chosen mr . . . . Met again, at 6. The business of the night deliberating about the relevancy of a clerk, Edinr., for granting a false certificate of proclamation of banns. The Synod unanimously of opinion with the Prby. that the Libel was relevant." (66)

Cunningham baptised children on any day, not usually in church, and at any reasonable hour. He baptises his sister's child in her house on a Saturday afternoon. (42) Of other week-day baptisms:

"Baptised in the Evening 2 ch.—One fifteen weeks old belong to James Yorstown, a man ignorant and I have reason to fear disregardful of the ordinances of Religion—He professed the contrary, and having refused his desire for the last 3 days, upon promise of his more circumspect behaviour, appointed him to bring his child and get it baptised in presence of the Sessn. The other Child belonged to a woman named Agnes Montgomery whose husband had left her." (46)

Cunningham usually administered the rite during his parish rounds. And he was no sectarian.

"Went and dined today with Mr. Shepherd of St. Clements Wells at the baptism of a child—Mr. Smith minr. of the Episcopal church Musselburgh officiated. Mr. and Mrs. Aitchieson Godfather and Godmother." (93)

The Tranent manse was an open door to most callers, and Cunningham gives an account of several of these. One evening his guests were neighbouring ministers and a few laymen, some of whom he describes in detail.

"Bannerman (Saltoun) a gentleman of 75 or 76 years of age—an agreeable, pleasant, well informed old gentleman of considerable taste in the Belles Lettres. A professed friend to that set of people in our Church who are advocates for the people, tho in his public capacity he has sometimes been considered as unsteady—a sound and orthodox preacher . . . ." (131)

"Roy (Aberlady)—A good Scholar—skilled in languages and the different branches of mathematics—of course a dry and lifeless

preacher—lately admitted a Member of the Antiquarian Society—particularly fond of such inquiries . . . Too much attached to favourite studies and the select enjoyment of his friends, to attend particularly to the duties of his pastoral office.” (132)

“Scott (Haddington)—Generally esteemed, an exact compound of honesty, good nature and indolence—The 1st always pleases ingenuous minds . . . the 2nd capable of being turned to great advantage or the most essential hurt of its owner—in the present case it leads to too much society and ofttimes to too great indulgences . . .” (132)

Cunningham was fond of company, but he kept up his studies, for the Diary has numerous references to the books he was reading.

His ministerial colleague at Tranent was the Rev. Robert Shirreff, minister of the Associate Congregation. Both were of an age, Shirreff being settled during 1779, and continuing in his one and only charge till 1819.<sup>1</sup> Cunningham refers to him several times.

“Drank tea with the Revd. Mr. Robert Sheriff Burgher minister in Tranent. Religious sentiments ought never to contract the community of love—I have often visited this gentleman—but seldom he returns my visits.” (47) Again:

“The Revd. Mr. Robt. Sherrif and sister Mrs. Mason drinking tea with us. Would wish to be much more intimate with Mr. Sherrif, if his views and mine more exactly corresponded—He rather stiff and not of that liberal turn I could wish every minr. of Christ.” (99)

There were other meetings but apparently no real friendship was established. Shirreff also wrote as we noted a Diary which covered some 40 years, extracts being edited and published with a memoir in 1821, by the Rev. John Brown of Whitburn, formerly of Haddington. The 2 diaries have little in common, either in style or content. Cunningham's is matter of fact, down to earth, with a sensible vein of piety running through; that of Shirreff is rather a daily manual of devotion than a record of events. He rarely mentions anyone. He writes of his wife but only to refer to the melancholy fact that she had died in child-bed, after 18 months of marriage. In contrast, Cunningham's record is alive with people, is happily absorbed in events. Shirreff only mentions his colleague once, and that under the significant date, Tranent, July 23rd, 1801. After a characteristically tiresome self-examination, seen on almost every page, Shirreff goes on:

“I have sought him (Jesus), I feel I wish to seek him, and hope he will

<sup>1</sup> *History of Tranent*, McNeill, p. 91.

not disappoint me—no, the Strength of Israel will not lie—with all safety I may trust in his Word—living and dying I will trust—Lord help mine unbelief—O the need I have of him. A serious providence is visiting me and many others in the death of Mr. C----- (N.B. The Parish Minister), who is now lying a corpse in his house. What shall I say? One is taken, another is left.”<sup>1</sup>

Cunningham's grave is to be seen in the churchyard at Tranent, the lettering on the tombstone being yet quite legible. Scott in the *Fasti* mentions 2 publications from his pen, *A sermon on the death of his mother* and, a *Catechetical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*. That these works have disappeared without trace, speaks for itself.

<sup>1</sup> *Shirreff's Diary*, J. Brown, 1821.